

Cheltenham Borough Council

Cabinet

Update report – Vacant Units Action Plan

Accountable member:

Cllr Martin Horwood, cabinet member for Economic Development, Culture and Wellbeing

Accountable officer:

Helen Mole, head of place marketing and inward investment

Ward(s) affected:

All wards

Key Decision: No

Executive summary:

In September 2023, Cabinet approved the vacant units and town centre land use efficiency action plan. This report updates members on the progress towards achievement of the objectives set and summarises plans for delivery for 2025/26.

Recommendation: That Cabinet:

- notes the report updating on progress against delivery of the vacant units action plan to date.
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1. Implications

1.1 Financial, Property and Asset implications

Any funding required for the action plan will come from existing base budget. There are no property implications resulting from the recommendations. Any future funding

opportunities identified will be reviewed by the finance team.

Signed off by: Gemma Bell, director of finance and assets (Deputy Section 151 Officer) gemma.bell@cheltenham.gov.uk

1.2 Legal implications

There are no direct legal implications identified at this stage. The current planning law framework provides a range of options which can be of assistance in reducing the number of vacant units within the town centre. Additionally, the report recognises the importance of maintaining links with the SLP team.

Signed off by: One Legal legalservices@onelegal.co.uk

1.3 Environmental and climate change implications

The action plan was assessed using the council's climate impact assessment tool in September 2023 and this has been updated and is attached as Appendix 3. Continued use of this tool as the work on the action plan progresses will also help ensure projects identified as part of the action plan are meeting council commitments to climate as well as other council priorities.

Signed off by: Maizy McCann, Climate Emergency Officer, maizy.mccann@cheltenham.gov.uk

1.4 Corporate Plan Priorities

This report contributes to the following Corporate Plan Priorities:

- Increasing the number of affordable homes through our £180m housing investment plan.
- Ensuring residents, communities and businesses benefit from Cheltenham's future growth and prosperity.

1.5 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Implications

An updated equality impact assessment is included at Appendix 2.

1.6 Performance management – monitoring and review

This action plan was created following consultation and engagement with stakeholders, setting out actions, timescales, owners and outcomes. These are monitored via reports to the council's leadership team and members.

2 Background

2.1 As set out in the action plan, and the previous Cabinet report, the way people access town centres is continually evolving and it's important that town centre stakeholders monitor and adapt to these changes to ensure the viability of their centres into the future. Through this action plan, Cheltenham Borough Council and Cheltenham BID have committed to a focused and sustained effort to reduce the number and impact of vacant properties in the town centre. The action plan sets out the measures that are being taken alongside the evidence for this approach. It should be noted that the action plan is a dynamic document, subject to ongoing updates and revisions.

2.2 The objectives of the action plan are:

1. Understand the current and ongoing position of empty units in the town centre.
2. Encourage the conversion of empty and underused space to maximise brownfield residential development.
3. Take enforcement against unsightly empty premises to clean up our town centre.
4. Work with landlords, agents, and town centre businesses to ensure that stakeholders understand key issues facing town centre development.
5. Encourage flexibility of the planning system and future strategic planning to bring more residential accommodation to the town centre.
6. Identify opportunities for meanwhile use where appropriate.
7. Highlight opportunities for regeneration and recognise the value of key development sites within the town acting as a catalyst for lasting change.

2.3 At the Cabinet meeting on 19 September 2023, members approved the action plan and set the direction for delivery of the objectives identified.

2.4 The We're Moving to Cheltenham website has been updated to reflect the work on tackling vacant units and the action plan can be found here:
<https://movingtocheltenham.com/vacant-units>

3 Delivery to date

3.1 The following table sets out a summary of the progress against the delivery of the objectives since the adoption of the plan in September 2023:

Objective(s)	Delivery	Next Steps
Objective 1 - Understand the current and ongoing position of empty units in the town centre.	The audit of Cheltenham town centre ground floor units is updated regularly via town centre visits and intelligence gathered from the business community. The current vacancy rate for the streets monitored is currently 7-8% compared to the national average	Continual monitoring and updating of the audit. Continue to develop relationships with key stakeholders who can

	<p>of 14%. In August 2024, a press release was issued to highlight this which can be found here.</p> <p>A cross-service team has been set up to monitor and update on units within the town centre.</p>	<p>inform and update.</p>
<p>Objective 2 - Encourage the conversion of empty and underused space to maximise brownfield residential development.</p> <p>Objective 5 - Encourage flexibility of the planning system and future strategic planning to bring more residential accommodation to the town centre.</p>	<p>Meetings have taken place with key officers involved with the Strategic Local Plan to update on the vacant units work in the town centre. A team has been created to include members of planning, enforcement, and neighbourhood officer to ensure that opportunities are highlighted and that the action plan is considered in the development of the SLP. The Marketing Cheltenham Team is supporting the development of a topic paper for the Strategic and Local Plan on Town Centre Regeneration.</p> <p>Monitoring and responding to national policy.</p>	<p>Retain involvement with the Strategic Local Plan work, including policy development.</p> <p>Officers are monitoring developments with the High Street Rental Auctions legislation (released in December 2024).</p>
<p>Objective 3 - Take enforcement against unsightly empty premises to clean up our town centre.</p>	<p>Through the audit, a list of vacant units which can be deemed to be unsightly has been compiled and work has been carried out with the enforcement team to identify where the council has the powers to intervene. Two units on the High Street have been contacted and improvements have been made to these. One has subsequently been sold and is now on the market to be let. A further three have been contacted, with no work carried out so far.</p> <p>A Teams group has been created with officers from multiple service areas with the council to share information and provide support.</p> <p>All owners of vacant units have been contacted in writing to request</p>	<p>Continual review and follow up with non-responsive property owners.</p>

	engagement.	
Objective 4 - Work with landlords, agents, and town centre businesses to ensure that stakeholders understand key issues facing town centre development.	<p>Officers have developed working relationships with several property agents across Cheltenham to understand the current market and challenges or opportunities. The idea of a stakeholder group was discussed during the formation of the action plan, but this has not been progressed following feedback from stakeholders as there are already several networks in place to meet this objective.</p> <p>Officers delivered a presentation for the Institute of Place Management highlighting the work being carried out in Cheltenham.</p> <p>An action to develop a 'vacancy toolkit' information pack for landlords in conjunction with Cheltenham BID is being reviewed by the BID chief executive.</p>	<p>Continue to meet and engage with stakeholders.</p> <p>Continue to seek opportunities to identify and share best practice with other authorities.</p> <p>Attend relevant networking events and meetings to continue to develop relationships and highlight opportunities.</p> <p>Follow up on the development of the toolkit with Cheltenham BID.</p>
Objective 6 - Identify opportunities for meanwhile use where appropriate.	<p>Officers monitor vacant units within the town centre to identify where there might be opportunities for meanwhile use and seek to contact landlords or property owners where possible to facilitate this.</p> <p>Letters have been sent to all vacant property owners to seek contact and offer support or advice with improvement / occupation.</p>	<p>There are a number of challenges with this approach as many landlords are not easily contactable or are not interested in supporting meanwhile use, however officers will continue to carry out this activity.</p>
Objective 7 - Highlight opportunities for regeneration and recognise the value of key development sites within the town acting as a catalyst for lasting change.	<p>Officers promote opportunities via CBC routes (e.g. social media and websites).</p> <p>An officer attended the Completely Retail Marketplace conference in September 2024 to highlight opportunities in Cheltenham to potential incoming retailers.</p> <p>Officers work with Gloucestershire County Council and other partners to</p>	<p>Opportunity for further development of the We're Moving to Cheltenham website (subject to resource / funding).</p>

	<p>highlight opportunities in the town to incoming businesses.</p> <p>An officer is available to meet with potential incoming businesses to the town. Four meetings took place in 2024.</p>	
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3.2 The government has set ambitious targets for delivering more homes with the reintroduction of housing targets. The council supports this agenda by encouraging redevelopment and regeneration, testing densities to maximise the use of land and supporting conversion of town centre uses to housing where that is appropriate and where it may reduce the number of vacancies and increase the supply of housing.

4 Reasons for recommendations

4.1 Members are asked to note the above update on activity.

5 Consultation and feedback

5.1 Engagement in the creation of the action plan took place with partners including the Cheltenham Chamber of Commerce, Cheltenham Economic Advisory Board, Cheltenham Civic Society, property owners and landlords, and agents promoting the town centre.

5.2 There has been ongoing engagement with Cheltenham BID, Cheltenham Chamber of Commerce, property owners and agents to support the delivery of the action plan.

6 Key risks

6.1 Risks are highlighted below in Appendix 1.

6.2 The key challenge or risk with delivering any positive intervention in vacant units continues to be a lack of engagement from landlords and property owners. All property owners for vacant units have been sent a letter requesting contact and engagement. No responses have been received so far, but these efforts will continue. From conversations with other places also looking at vacancies, we know this is very common and difficult to overcome.

Report author:

Helen Mole, Head of place marketing and inward investment,
helen.mole@cheltenham.gov.uk

Appendices:

1. Risk Assessment
2. Equality Impact Assessment
3. Climate Change Impact Assessment

Background information:

- Cabinet Report 19 September 2023
<https://democracy.cheltenham.gov.uk/documents/s45033/Vacant%20Units%20and%20Town%20Centre%20Land%20Use%20Action%20Plan%20-%20officer%20report.pdf>

Appendix 1: Risk Assessment

Risk ref	Risk description	Risk owner	Impact score (1-5)	Likelihood score (1-5)	Initial raw risk score (1 - 25)	Risk response	Controls / Mitigating actions	Control / Action owner	Deadline for controls/ actions
	Lack of engagement from property owners	Helen Mole	5	3	15	Accept the risk.	Contact all owners of vacant units to attempt to engage with proactive response to vacancies	Helen Mole	Ongoing
	Lack of engagement from partners including internal and external stakeholders	Helen Mole	4	1	4	Accept the risk.	Partners are already engaged and share mutual objectives. Continue relationship management.	Helen Mole	Ongoing
	Lack of engagement from developers	Helen Mole	4	3	12	Reduce the risk.	Continue engagement and ensure attendance at local property forums. Understand and highlight the opportunities.	Helen Mole. Planning department.	Ongoing.

Appendix 2: Equality Impact Assessment

1. Identify the policy, project, function or service change

a. Person responsible for this Equality Impact Assessment

Officer responsible: Helen Mole	Service Area: Place Marketing and Inward Investment
Title: Head of place marketing and inward investment	Date of assessment: January 2025
Signature: <i>Helen Mole</i>	

b. Is this a policy, function, strategy, service change or project?

Policy

If other, please specify:

c. Name of the policy, function, strategy, service change or project

Is this new or existing?

Other

Please specify reason for change or development of policy, function, strategy, service change or project

An update on the delivery of an existing action plan

d. What are the aims, objectives and intended outcomes and who is likely to benefit from it?

Aims:	To identify vacant units in the town centre and work together proactively with town centre stakeholders to implement a series of actions
Objectives:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand the current and ongoing position of empty units in the town centre - Encourage the conversion of empty space to residential to maximise brownfield development - Take enforcement against unsightly empty premises - Work with landlords, agents, and town centre businesses to ensure that stakeholders understand key issues facing town centre development - Encourage flexibility of the planning system and future strategic planning to bring more residential accommodation to the town centre

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify opportunities for meanwhile use where appropriate - Highlight opportunities for regeneration and recognise the value of key development sites within the town acting as a catalyst for lasting change
Outcomes:	More awareness of vacancy rates in the town centre and a proactive approach to responding to these.
Benefits:	A more attractive and welcoming town centre.

e. What are the expected impacts?	
Are there any aspects, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could have an impact on the lives of people, including employees and customers.	No
Do you expect the impacts to be positive or negative?	No impact expected
Please provide an explanation for your answer:	
A more attractive town centre with fewer unsightly vacant units will positively impact the user experience and support the economy. It is anticipated that this will impact all users of the town centre equally.	

If your answer to question e identified potential positive or negative impacts, or you are unsure about the impact, then you should carry out a Stage Two Equality Impact Assessment.

f. Identify next steps as appropriate	
Stage Two required	No